

‘BLESSED ARE THE DEAD WHICH DIE IN THE LORD’:
ANDREW FULLER ON THE BEATIFIC VISION

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ABSTRACT. This essay examines the funeral sermon given by the Baptist theologian Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) for his friend and deacon Beeby Wallis in 1792 as a vantage-point from which to pursue reflection on Fuller’s concept of heaven and the beatific vision. The sermon has two main themes: the rest and rewards of those who die in Christ. The essay examines how Fuller interprets both of these phrases and then, looking at the rest of Fuller’s corpus, notes that ultimately God himself is the believer’s reward.

KEYWORDS: blessedness, beatific vision, Andrew Fuller, rest, rewards, Beeby Wallis

Who Was Andrew Fuller?

Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), an indefatigable and fearless Baptist theologian and minister, was one of the outstanding theologians of the eighteenth-century transatlantic world. The importance of his theological achievements was noted both during and after his life. For instance, the College of New Jersey (1798) and Yale (1805) awarded him a D.D., both of which he declined to accept. His close friend John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825) was confident that he was ‘perhaps the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to our denomination’ (Ryland 1815: 2–3). Succeeding generations have confirmed Ryland’s estimation of his friend. According to the American Baptist historian A. H. Newman, his ‘influence on American Baptists... [was] incalculable’. Newman’s older contemporary, the Victorian Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) described Fuller as the ‘greatest theologian’ of his century, while A. C. Underwood, the Baptist historian of the last century, said of Fuller—in a statement that clearly echoes Ryland’s estimation—that ‘he was the soundest and most creatively useful

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theologian the Particular Baptists have ever had' (Newman 1950: 4:409; Laws 1942: 127; Underwood 1947: 166).

Fuller was born in Wicken, a small agricultural village in Cambridgeshire. His parents Robert Fuller (1723–1781) and Philippa Gunton (1726–1816), were farmers who rented a succession of dairy farms. In 1761 his parents moved a short distance to Soham, where he and his family began to regularly attend the local Calvinistic Baptist church, and where Fuller was converted in November, 1769. After being baptized the following spring, he became a member of the Soham church. In 1774 Fuller was called to the pastorate of this work. Fuller's time as pastor of the Soham church was a decisive period for the shaping of Fuller's theological perspective. It was during this period that he began a life-long study of the works of the American divine Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), which, along with his commitment to live under the authority of the infallible Scriptures, was critical in making him a first-class theologian. He stayed until 1782, when he became the pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist congregation at Kettering in Northamptonshire.

At Kettering, he published the first of a number of key works. Among them was a rebuttal of deism, the definitive response to Sandemanianism, and his epoch-making *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785), in which he sought to be faithful to the central emphases of historic Calvinism while at the same time setting forth biblical and theological arguments for 'the duty of sinners to believe in Jesus Christ' (the subtitle of the work). With regard to Fuller's own vocation, this book was a key factor in determining the shape of his ministry in the years to come. It led directly to Fuller's wholehearted commitment to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792 and his role as secretary of this society till his death in 1815. Drawing upon significant reserves of strength, for much of this period of his life he worked ten hours a day at his desk when he was not out preaching, or fund-raising, or visiting his church family. This missionary society was at the forefront of the globalization of Christianity in the nineteenth century. Peter Toon is quite right to state that 'Fuller's example and thought are a constant inspiration' for the church today (Toon 1992: 262).

The Funeral Sermon for Beeby Wallis

Beeby Wallis (1735–1792) had been a deacon at the Kettering church since 1768. His great-grandfather, William Wallis was the founding pastor of the church (Fuller 1988: 1:158). What Fuller loved about this deacon was his humility and his activism, both of which were summed up in a remark that Wallis made to Fuller near the end of his life: 'I reckon it the greatest honour of my life to have been employed in promoting the interest of Christ' (Fuller 1845: 1:159). Wallis' home, known as the Gospel Inn because of the

hospitality shown to ministers of the gospel by its owner, would be the locale of the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in the fall of 1792. But Wallis did not live to see this historic event, for he had died earlier in the year, in April. Naturally Fuller took his funeral. His sermon on the occasion, ‘The Blessedness of the Dead Who Die in the Lord’, provides an excellent vantage-point from which to view his conception of life in heaven and the beatific vision.

The sermon, based on Revelation 14:13 (‘And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them’ [KJV]), touched on vital biblical themes such as the need for Christian perseverance, the promise of rewards, heavenly rest, the eschatological significance of earthly labour, true blessedness, and the inevitability of death. It was followed by a short memoir of Wallis. Fuller stressed that in his opinion, the latter was not usually necessary in a funeral sermon, since ‘the generality of characters, even of good men, have nothing in them very remarkable or worthy of being held up for our imitation’. But this was not the case with Wallis, whom Fuller clearly regarded as having had an ‘enviable... piety’ and having lived an ‘eminently holy’ life (Fuller 1988: 1:157).

Observations on Revelation 14:13

In the exposition proper, Fuller began by stating that the ‘original design of the passage [in Revelation 14] seems to have been to support the afflicted followers of Christ in times of persecution’ (Fuller 1988: 1:152). Yet, he observed that though this passage was originally intended ‘to arm the holy martyrs against the terrors of death’, it was equally applicable to Christians under other degrees of affliction as well (Fuller 1988: 1:152). Fuller first turned to the character of those ‘who die in the Lord’. They are necessarily united to Christ, as in a marriage union where two parties are united by mutual affection, common pursuits, and shared goals in life. Death is then the introduction of the believer to his or her full union with Christ (Fuller 1988: 1:152–153).

Second, Fuller emphasized that a good part of the blessedness observed in this passage comes from the voice from heaven, which is proof that heaven values the homecoming of the saints. This stands in stark contrast to the perspective of fallen humanity that values being alive and prosperity in this world. From the world’s perspective, death has nothing to commend it. Third, the fact that John was commanded by God to write down this verse is indicative that God was concerned that other generations beyond John’s know about this blessing. Fourth, Fuller argued that the phrase, ‘from henceforth’, must refer to the time of the soul’s departure from the body in

physical death, and should not be taken to imply that those who died believing in the living God before the time of Christ were not blessed. Fifth, Fuller saw two aspects of this post-death blessedness—rest from labour and the reward for good works, both of which then serve as this sermon’s twin themes (Fuller 1988: 1:153).

Rest from Labour

Fuller’s theology of the beatific vision does not envisage life in the world to come as ‘a mere cessation’ from work after death, since the saints will be actively ‘serving God day and night in his temple’ and priestly-kingly work is a part of heavenly blessedness (Fuller 1988: 1:153). The term ‘labour’ has a negative connotation, and implies ‘painful exercise, weariness, or fatigue’. Since ‘a great part’ of the Christian’s life in this world entails opposition to cultural trends and wicked principles, there must perforce be a weariness attached to Christian living in the here and now. The beatific vision will then involve the elimination of striving against ‘the course of this world’ with its relentless current of wickedness and worldliness (Fuller 1988: 1:153). Fuller took time to stress that swimming against the stream, whether pagan idolatry in antiquity or ‘infidelity and profaneness’ in the modern world, is no easy matter. Those who do so are not adamant. The martyrs had ‘wives, and children, and friends’, who cried, ‘Spare thyself!’ Equally in Fuller’s world, there were temptations posed by religious fashions and to hold fast to ‘the dictates of Scripture’ meant being ‘stigmatized’ and being exposed to ‘scorn and contempt’. To stand fast for the Gospel in any earthly context then must involve stresses and strains, that is, ‘labours’ (Fuller 1988: 1:153–154).

The decline of bodily strength also entails labour for the conscientious believer who wants to serve the Lord wholly but no longer has the physical strength to do so. Such was the case with Wallis, Fuller noted. ‘Reading and prayer, and every other religious duty, was a labour’ for him (Fuller 1988: 1:154). The ‘greatest and most grievous struggle’, though, in this world for the Christian is owing to the presence of indwelling sin: this is the ‘most dangerous stream’ against which he or she has to swim. Whenever the believer wishes to wholeheartedly ‘meditate, pray, praise, preach, or hear’ (the list of action words here describing Christian spirituality is noteworthy), indwelling sin is present to distract and oppose. ‘To be at rest’ from this struggle, in particular, will be ‘heaven indeed!’ (Fuller 1988: 1:154).

Activism to Fuller was his God-given responsibility, and he worked for God with ‘indefatigable zeal’ (Fuller 1882: 92). To be liberated from striving against the world, physical challenges, and indwelling sin in order to serve God unhindered would entail the eschatological fulfillment of all Christian labour in this world and be rest of the purest kind. In another sermon, ‘Past

Trials a Plea for Future Mercies', Fuller maintained the necessity of such labour against sin and its effects in order to enjoy heaven's rest more fully. 'What is rest to him that is never weary, or peace to one that is a stranger to trouble? Heaven itself would not be that to us which it will be, if we came not out of great tribulation to the possession of it' (Fuller 1988: 1:461). And yet again, in another context, Fuller compared this heavenly rest to seasons of peace in Israel's history under the reigns of David and Solomon, where there was no war and where shalom filled the nation. Likewise, heaven will radiate *pax aeterna*, and the true and better David will reign over his people in perfect shalom (Fuller 1988: 1:602–603). Fuller's activism comes through again at the close of the sermon when he commended Beeby Wallis for his 'indefatigable industry, patience, and perseverance' (Fuller 1988: 1:159).

The Ground of Eternal Rest

For Fuller, eternal rest did not begin when the soul left the body at death and arrived in heaven. It can be experienced to a certain measure in this earthly life. And yet, Fuller was chary of the danger of seeking a rest that was not grounded in the objective atoning work of Christ. As Fuller stated in a sermon he preached in Norwich:

The first operations of true religion in the mind are in this way. Christ may not be the first object to which a sinner's thoughts are turned [at conversion]; this may be his sin and exposedness to the wrath of God; but let our thoughts of sin and misery be as pungent as they may, if they lead us not to Christ for salvation, there is no true religion in them. He is 'the way' to God: 'no man cometh unto the Father but by him'. We may be burdened under guilt and fear; but, till we *come* to him with our burden, there will be no gospel rest for our souls. The promise is not made to us as burdened, but as coming to Christ with our burdens... (Fuller 1988: 1:433).

Fuller insisted that there are emotive experiences or impressions on the mind that can easily pass for conversion that actually contain no guarantee of actual peace with God. In a tract against Antinomianism, Fuller explained the danger facing a person brought under conviction of sin:

It is of infinite importance... that we take up our rest in nothing short of Christ. When a sinner is convinced of his dangerous condition, fears and terrors will commonly possess him... Longing for ease to his troubled spirit, he is in the most imminent danger of taking up his rest in anything that will afford him a present relief; and if in such a state of mind he receive an impression that God has forgiven and accepted him, or read a book or hear a sermon favourable to such a mode of obtaining comfort, he will very probably imbibe it, and become inebriated with the delicious draught. And now he thinks he has discovered the light of life, and feels to have lost his burden (Fuller 1988: 2:739–740).

In Fuller's theology, eternal rest begins at conversion and increases in proportionate relation to a Christian's progressive holiness. It finds its climax and culmination in full glory in heaven where the striving against sin is no more and service in God's temple is perfectly worshipful.

The Rewards of Grace

Rejecting the notion of righteous works serving as the 'ground of justification' on the last day, Fuller was keen nonetheless to insist that good works will follow Christians into glory and serve among the 'causes of their felicity ... [and] will contribute to augment our bliss (Fuller 1988: 1:155)'. He argued with tight logic and Scriptural proofs that degrees of happiness in heaven (as well as degrees of misery in hell) correspond directly to the degrees of loving obedience (as well as rebellious disobedience) during one's earthly life. Fuller elaborated on the degrees of reward in heaven in his ordination sermon 'The Work and Encouragements of the Christian Minister'.

It is an unscriptural and irrational notion, that all will have an equal degree of happiness in heaven. All will be perfectly happy, but some will not have so large a capacity for happiness as others. Every vessel will be full, but some vessels will contain more than others. 'One star differeth from another star in glory' [1 Corinthians 15:41]. The apostle Paul must enjoy more in heaven than a soul caught up from infancy; since part of the happiness of heaven will consist of remembrance of the past... But the diversity most important for *our* consideration is that which will arise from the manner in which we have performed our trust. In proportion to the degree of fidelity with which we have discharged the trust committed to us in this world will be the honour and happiness conferred upon us in the next.

You will participate in that joy of which your Lord partakes: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord' [Matthew 25:21]. You will 'sit down with him on his throne' [Revelation 3:21]. Whatever the joy is that was 'set before him', and for which he 'endured the cross, despising the shame', in that joy, if you have 'run with patience the race which is set before you, looking unto him' [Hebrews 12:1-2], you shall partake. That which rejoices Christ's heart will rejoice yours—the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. He will not rejoice alone; but admit to his joy all those who have had any share in the great work to accomplish which he humbled himself unto death. My brother, let this thought encourage you amidst all your trials—that you are to enter into the joy of your Lord. 'To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne' (Fuller 1988: 1:500–501).

Citing numerous promises of Christ to store up treasures in heaven, to sow to the Spirit, and to rejoice in tribulation in light of future reward, Fuller contended 'that everlasting life is a harvest that will grow out of the seed

sown to the Spirit' (Fuller 1988: 156). Moreover, he preëmpted the objection that he was promoting meritorious rewards by arguing that ultimately it is 'the Lord who has wrought all our works in us, and if the reward with which he is pleased to crown them be a matter of grace and not of debt, where then is boasting? It is only God's graciously rewarding his own work' (Fuller 1988: 156). In a different context, Fuller explained that these rewards 'contain nothing inconsistent with the doctrine of grace, because those very works which it pleased God to honour are the effects of his own operation. He rewards the works of which he is the author and proper cause. He who 'ordains peace for us'—'hath wrought all our works in us' (Fuller 1988: 3:743).

Additionally, Fuller grounded God's pleasure in rewarding his own good works in our union with Christ. Not only are Christians accepted in Christ, 'but what they do for Christ is accepted also, and rewarded for his sake' (Fuller 1988: 156). In an ordination sermon that Fuller preached on the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, he made the same point:

The best services we can render are mingled with sin, and therefore, instead of deserving a reward, need forgiveness. The reward we shall receive will be a reward of grace, not of debt. Were it not for the sake of Christ, nothing we do could be accepted, there being so much sin cleaving even to our best services. The Lord accepted Abel and his offering. First, he accepts our persons for the sake of Christ, and then our services. And our services, being accepted, become also rewardable for his sake: our future honours are a part of Christ's reward. If you are instrumental in saving a soul, it will be impossible for you to meet that soul in heaven, and not rejoice over it; it will, in fact, be your crown of rejoicing. So your honour and blessedness will form a part of Christ's reward (Fuller 1988: 1:500).

Fuller's biographer, John Webster Morris, explained the train of Fuller's argument thus:

[God] now accepts believing sinners for the sake of his beloved Son, and not only blesses them with all spiritual blessings 'in him, through him, and for his sake', but also rewards their services—in his kingdom, through the same medium—their services become impregnated with his worthiness, their petitions also being offered up with the 'much incense' of his intercession. Thus, God in approving the services of believers, approves of the obedience and sacrifice of his Son, of which they are the fruits; and in rewarding them, continues to reward him, or to express his good pleasure in his mediation (Morris 1830:146).

Since God loves his chosen children in Christ, their works of love and holiness induce him to reward 'in such a manner' (Fuller 1988: 1:157). Heaven will be a land of increasing joy for God's saints, for they are not only saved

from God's wrath by his grace but are also rewarded for his gracious power at work in their good deeds. Again, in the ordination sermon referenced above, Fuller explained that the underlying motive of faithful service to God is the reward of hearing, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant':

[I]n some cases men may say, 'Well done', when, in the sight of him who judges the heart, and recognizes the springs of action, our work may be ill done. And even if we have done comparatively well, we must not rest satisfied with the approbation of our friends. Many have sat down contented with the plaudits of their hearers, spoiled and ruined. It is the 'Well done' at the last day which we should seek, and with which only we should be satisfied. There have been young ministers, of very promising talents, who have been absolutely nursed to death with human applause, and the hopes they inspired blighted and blasted by the flattery of the weak and inconsiderate. The sound of 'Well done' has been reiterated in their ears so often, that at last (poor little minds!) they have thought, Surely it *was* well done; they have inhaled the delicious draught, they have sat down to enjoy it, they have relaxed their efforts, and, after their little hour of popular applause, they have retired behind the scenes, and become of little or no account in the Christian world; and, what is worse, their spirituality has declined, and they have sunk down into a state of desertion, dispiritedness, and inactivity, as regards this world, and of uncertainty, if not of fearful forebodings, as to another. ... My brother, you may sit down when God says, 'Well done!' for then your trust will be discharged; but it is at your peril that you rest satisfied with anything short of this. Keep that reward in view, and you will not, I trust, be unfaithful in the service of your Lord (Fuller 1988: 1:449–450).

God: the Believer's Reward

In Fuller's broader theology of heavenly rewards, though not explicitly mentioned in the funeral sermon for Beeby Wallis, God himself is the Christian's highest joy and thus greatest reward. He argued that the 'grand source of spiritual enjoyment', according to John 17:3, is that 'knowledge of the only true God, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent'. This is 'an epitome of the gospel' (Fuller 1988: 3:727). More explicitly, commenting on Ephesians 3:14–21, Fuller argued that even the knowledge of Christ's love was not the end of our experience of joy. The purpose of Paul's petitions in Ephesians 3 is, according to Fuller,

that ye may be able to comprehend what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge... In proportion as we comprehend the love of Christ, we are supposed to be 'filled with all the fulness of God'. If there be a sentence in the Bible expressive of ultimate bliss, I say again, surely it is this (Fuller 1988: 3:731).

Like his mentor Jonathan Edwards, Fuller stressed that God is the source from which all streams of joy and reward flow. The unremitting heavenly

delight of Christ's inexhaustible love will compel 'the tide of celestial bliss to rise higher and higher... Knowledge and happiness must be eternally progressive' (Fuller 1988: 3:732). Thus, even if our prayers go unanswered—and this is a purely hypothetical supposition for Fuller—'yet prayer to God is its own reward' (Ryland 1816: 167). What can be lacking for those who have God for their 'exceeding great reward?' (Fuller 1988: 3:61) Furthermore, his empyrean-centric theology contended that heavenly bliss is not a new river from which believers have never drunk; rather, it is a greater effulgence of that salvation which they presently experience in part. As the Baptist divine stated in a 1796 sermon:

What is heaven?... It is the same that we have already received. We have received the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls... In short, the joys of heaven will consist in loving and praising the Lamb, and exploring the system of redemption, and that is the chief joy of the present state (Fuller 1988: 1:394).

The joy that believers experience in treasuring the gospel in the here and now of this world is qualitatively the same joy that they will experience in heaven. The main distinction between heavenly bliss and earthly gospel-enjoyment is a quantitative one, namely, the difference of degrees of happiness.

As he concluded the sermon proper before he recalled the godly character of Beeby Wallis, Fuller noted four distinct applications that flow out of the doctrine of rewards. Since those who die in the Lord enter into the eternal blessedness of heavenly rest and reward, those whom they leave behind should derive comfort from the fact that the deceased brethren are now in enjoying God in a much greater fashion than they ever could in this world. Second, he challenged Christians to press on and not give up, knowing that one day the labours of this life will have ceased and only remembered with joy and gratitude. Third, he emphasized that the struggles of this world—against temptation and in the face of afflictions—should be seen as an opportunity to invest in heavenly reward: 'what we are doing in this life' is 'the seed of an eternal harvest' (Fuller 1988: 1:156–157). And fourth, Christians ought to tremble that the works of the unregenerate also follow them, but it will be to hell where they will receive their harvest, which, in sum, is the miserific vision (Fuller 1988: 1:157).

A Concluding Word

Fuller's funeral sermon for his dear friend Beeby Wallis mirrored the original intention of the Apostle John in Revelation 14:13, which was to encourage afflicted Christians—in this case, Beeby's family and friends—to hope in future reward and to rejoice that those who have died have entered into eternal realm of joy. The sermon carefully knits together pastoral applica-

tion with orthodox theological affirmation, reminding his hearers and his readers now that Fuller was, above all things, a pastor-theologian (Brewster 2010). The sermon emphasized that at the heart of the experience of heaven, the vision of God as it were, were rest from labour and reward for grace-empowered work. In heaven as they see God, Christians will rest from all the labour they experience in this life in opposition to sin and the curse. But, their work will not cease; they will be perfected and supremely worshipful as they serve God with infinite gladness. Ultimately, the believer's greatest reward is God himself. For the Baptist divine, the center of heavenly bliss, in both rest and rewards, is God alone.

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